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Bernard MacLavery: A Novelist with a Catholic Sensibility

EAMON MAHER¹

Like many others I would imagine, my first introduction to the work of the Belfast writer Bernard MacLavery (born in 1942) was through the successful film adaptations of his first novel, *Lamb*, with Liam Neeson in the main role, and the highly successful 'Troubles' film, *Cal*, based on the novel of the same name. Nominated for several prestigious literary awards, a member of Aosdána, author of numerous well-regarded novels and short story collections, MacLavery is nevertheless largely neglected in terms of the critical attention he has attracted. The shining exceptions are the essay collection, *About Bernard MacLavery: New Critical Readings*, edited by Richard Rankin Russell and published by Bloomsbury in 2014, and the monograph, also authored by Rankin Russell, *Bernard MacLavery*, published in 2009. When you read through his work, as I have done in recent months, this critical neglect is difficult to fathom. Because MacLavery is a skilled wordsmith and someone with keen insights into the human psyche. Like his fellow Belfast writer, Brian Moore, MacLavery is also a wonderful storyteller with a great feel for dialogue, characters, landscape (or cityscape), and a sharp understanding of the factors that make people behave in a certain manner, be it family background, social class, religion or education.

For the purpose of this article, I propose to concentrate on a few of MacLavery's novels and to examine how his portrayal of Catholicism is one that reveals the enduring influence of his Belfast childhood. In a 2006 interview with Richard Rankin Russell, the author explains how a Catholic upbringing stays embedded in a writer's mind, regardless of how far one may stray from formal religious practice:

That language becomes your mental furniture of exotic and little things that people your mind as a young one. I've said before that it introduces you to imagery and to symbol. You know, you grow up as an altar boy. At eight years of age, you know that the black vestments are for death, the white are for hope, and green for something else. I think that I have rejected Catholicism, yet I understand how as a child you can be introduced to the biggest and hardest problems in the world through it. To concern for other people, to try and save lives.²

Writers such as James Joyce, Graham Greene, Kate O'Brien, John McGahern and a host of others regularly acknowledged the debt they owed Catholicism for providing them with a sense of mystery and sacredness, of good and evil, of life and death, all of which played an important role in the art that they would later produce. For MacLavery, it was 'imagery and symbol' that fed what I would describe as the Catholic sensibility which is palpable in most of his writings.

We will begin, as is logical, with his first novel, *Lamb*, published in 1980, at a time when the full extent of crimes against children in religious-run institutions such as the Industrial Schools, mother and child homes, Magdalene Laundries and correctional centres had not yet come to public

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² Richard Rankin Russell, 'An Interview with Bernard MacLavery', *Irish Literary Supplement* (Fall 2006), pp.21-22, p.22.

attention to any great extent. The main character, Michael Lamb, came from a devout rural Ulster background, a factor that influenced his decision at a young age to become a Christian Brother – he took the religious name Sebastian – and was sent to work in a school for young male offenders. The superior in this institution, Brother Benedict, urged his staff not to spare the rod when it came to disciplining the inmates: ‘If they do not conform, we thrash them. We teach them a little of God and a lot of fear. It is a combination that seems to work.’³ Brother Sebastian does not subscribe to this view, however, especially when it comes to Owen Kane, a fragile boy whose parents’ neglect (the father left shortly after he was born and the mother is an alcoholic) led to his incarceration in the first instance. He had been involved in some petty crime and was prone to epileptic attacks. Owen’s arrival in the home comes at a time when Brother Sebastian is already beginning to doubt his decision to devote his life to God. The death of his father, a gentle farmer whose care for his invalided wife was a model of Christian practice and whose kind mentoring of his son would leave a lasting mark, prompts Sebastian to wonder if both God and himself would be better served by his leaving the Brothers:

He knew now that his time there (in the school) had been governed by a series of prohibitions and, while God existed for him, this was acceptable. But once he ceased to believe in the God of the Brothers, all he was left with was a handful of negatives. (90)

The one great obstacle to his leaving is the prospect of what might happen to Owen after his departure: he is protective of the boy in a way that is probably unhealthy. He sees how ill-suited Owen is to the institution – he tried to escape unsuccessfully on a few occasions already – and he takes the rather drastic decision to abscond with the boy to London. Michael realises that the authorities will eventually catch up with them, but he is intent on ensuring that Owen experiences happiness for as long as possible. Michael, although he has become seriously disillusioned with organised religion, is still attracted to an all-loving Christ figure to whom he can turn in times of need. He is beginning to question his faith seriously, however, as is evident from the extra phrase he attaches to all his prayers: ‘If You exist God, if You exist, help me’. (111)

After a few weeks in London, feeling the net closing in around them, Michael decides to return to Ireland, where he decides to induce a fit in the boy while they are out swimming. His intention is for the boy to die before the authorities arrive and return him to the care of the Brothers. He sees himself as acting in the place of God, a God who remains silent: ‘Oh Jesus, if you are there, help me’, he implores. Nothing happens, however, apart from a rather strange response from nature: ‘Michael looked away and up to the sky, away from the boy’s face, and saw the lightning flash from clouds rumpled and coloured like brains.’ (150) Could this be the sign he was looking for? It would appear not, as he then observes: ‘He had no luck. No faith. And now, no love.’ (152)

The choice of name for the main character leads one to believe that it might well be Michael, not Owen, who is the sacrificial ‘lamb’. After all, it is he who will ultimately face trial for murder. It is he who will have to endure all sorts of unsavoury interrogation in the witness box about his reasons for abducting and then murdering the boy. A recurring trope in MacLaverty’s work is the compulsion his characters feel to follow a course of action that they know will end badly. They are like tragic heroes who are obsessed with a fatal attraction that they cannot quell. God appears oblivious to their

³ Bernard MacLaverty, *Lamb* (Hammondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1981), p.14. It is this Penguin edition that will be used to reference quotes from the novel, with page numbers in brackets.

suffering, as is clear from the concluding lines of *Lamb*: '[...] the good I do is the evil that results ... he saw three gulls, their yellow beaks angled with screeching, descending slowly, with meticulous care.' (152) The gulls are swooping down on their prey, Owen, whose eyes they will presumably target, but their sharp beaks also demand retribution from Michael for what he has done.

Cal is a more overtly political book than *Lamb*, in that it shows how a young man, Cahal Mc Cluskey, Cal to his friends, gets caught up in the violence of the Troubles, which leads to his involvement in the assassination by the IRA of a reserve police officer, Robert Morton. He then finds employment on the farm of the victim's family and falls in love with Marcella, the deceased's widow. Cal suffers from sectarianism – he and his father are burnt out of their house that is located in a Protestant enclave and he finds it difficult to acquire regular work – and his republicanism is enflamed by the discrimination that awaits him at every corner. This explains the sense of freedom that takes hold of him each time he crosses the border: "This was Ireland – the real Ireland. He felt as though he had come out of the weight and darkness of Protestant Ulster, with its neat, stifled Sabbath towns. On top of a tree a green, white and gold tricolour flickered in the wind."⁴ (39) When he starts working on the Morton farm, he believes that he is atoning in some way for the crime that was committed: 'For three days, although he ended up each day physically filthy, work had a cleansing effect on him. It was as if idleness had allowed dirt to accumulate on his soul, to cloy his mind, and work moved him through it untouched.' (56)

He faces a real dilemma when he and Marcella (also a Catholic) become attracted to one another and end up having sex in the cottage adjoining the Morton farmhouse that Cal moved into after he and his father lost their home. Living in close proximity to Marcella, who is completely unaware of Cal's involvement in her husband's death, allows what is initially friendship to develop into a sexual relationship. Shortly after this coupling, the police come to arrest Cal, which means that all will be revealed to Marcella. When he first moved into the cottage, Cal reflected:

He thought of himself as a monk in his cell not only deprived of light and comfort, but in the mood he was in, deprived of God. He has ceased to believe in the one thing that dignified his suffering. Matt Talbot lived with chains embedded in him for the love of God. What if he had not believed in God and yet had continued with his pain? What if he had suffered for another person? To suffer for something which didn't exist, that was like Ireland. People were dying every day, men and women were being crippled and turned into vegetables in the name of Ireland. (83)

Does any cause – political, religious, sexual – ever justify the spilling of human blood? Cal has enough self-awareness to realise that hitting easy Unionist targets will do nothing other than add to the bitterness that exists already between the two sides. He may well have been pressurised into being part of the IRA group that killed Marcella's husband, but, even so, his participation in this fatal act is something that she could never forgive. While Cal was at Mass one Sunday morning watching Marcella, the words of the priest to the effect that 'sin was outlawing yourself from God' should have acted as a warning to him. Instead, he justifies his act by attempting to turn pain into a gift for God:

⁴ Bernard MacLaverty, *Cal* (Hammondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1984), p.54. All subsequent in-text citations will be to this edition, with page number in brackets.

Cal was unsure of God but it came to him that the gift of suffering might work without Him. To offer it not up but *for* someone. 'I suffer for you, you suffer for me.' And that person might never know, that was the beauty of it. That way it was even more selfless. (105-6)

This strange conception of suffering assumes a special resonance for the young man when a preacher shouts at him one day: 'Without the shedding of blood there can be no forgiveness'. (143) It is no coincidence then that Cal presents Marcella at Christmas with a copy of Grünewald's painting of Christ crucified: this reinforces the theme of suffering because of the detailed way in which the wounds are emphasised: 'the flesh was diseased with sores from the knotted scourges, the mouth open gasping for breath.' (153) It is not an exaggeration to say that MacLavery presents his hero as a Christ-like figure who must suffer hugely in order for the sins of the world to be forgiven. Because Cal is not just expiating his own sins: he is also taking responsibility for the sins of a society riven by sectarian violence and misunderstanding. This may well explain Cal's relief as expressed by the last lines of the novel:

The next morning, Christmas Eve, almost as if he expected it, the police arrived to arrest him and he stood in a dead man's Y-fronts listening to the charge, grateful that at last someone was going to beat him to within an inch of his life. (154)

This indifference to his plight reminds us of Meursault at the end of Camus' classic novel, *L'étranger*, who heads to the guillotine hoping that the crowd will greet him with cries of hatred. Both men comprehend that their acts merit stern punishment and that there is no point postponing their fate any longer. The link between his character and Christ is reinforced by Camus' statement that Meursault was the only Christ that modern society deserved. In a similar way, Cal is a poor substitute for the real Christ, which does not prevent him, however, from sharing some of the qualities of the former, particularly in relation to the purifying effect of suffering.⁵

Midwinter Break, MacLavery's most recent award-winning publication, is a work of maturity. It relates the problems encountered by a retired Belfast couple, Gerry and Stella Gilmore, now living in Glasgow, as they struggle with their relationship. Gerry, a retired academic (he specialised in architecture), is losing control of his drinking and his barbed comments about her religious convictions grate on Stella almost as much as his drinking. What he fails to realise is that, when Stella was a chance victim of the Troubles, receiving a bullet in the stomach when in the later stages of pregnancy, she made a promise to God that she would live a devout life if He would save her baby. Such a scenario is worthy of Graham Greene, but MacLavery shows himself to be equally adept at portraying how a promise to God is not something that can be easily forgotten. Hence, during a winter break in Amsterdam, Stella investigates the possibility of joining a lay congregation of women who devote their lives to prayer and good deeds. She explains what she is looking for to Kathleen, an Irishwoman she meets during her stay: "A more valuable life. Which is spiritual *and* useful.' Stella shrugged her shoulders. 'How can we make the world a better place? To make a

⁵ Rankin Russell offers an excellent analysis of the link between MacLavery's character and Christ: 'With his repeatedly marked body, specifically the welts on his shoulder, his torn and bleeding hands, and his bleeding scalp, Cal somewhat resembles the crucified Christ, yet his "martyrdom" without confession cannot obtain forgiveness for his part in the murder, whereas Christ's death and resurrection purchased the salvation of believers.' Richard Rankin Russell, *Bernard MacLavery* (Bucknell, Pennsylvania: Bucknell University Press, 2009), 69.

contribution, however small. Despite what the Church thinks about women.”⁶ Having been the beneficiary of what she perceives to be a miracle – her child was delivered safely in spite of her being shot – Stella feels compelled to fulfil the promise she made and to do something more with her life than watch her husband drink.

A number of factors combine during their stay abroad that show Gerry that he could lose his wife if he fails to change his ways. A point has been reached in their relationship where they have stopped communicating on any deep level. Gerry cannot really comprehend his wife’s yearning for spiritual meaning: ‘Catholicism was her source of spiritual stem cells. They could turn into anything her spiritual being required.’ (201) Gerry is sceptical about what she perceives as the emotional nature of Stella’s quest. Frustrated by sharing her life with someone who spends most of his time in a drunken stupor, Stella exclaims: ‘My religion is the *practice* of my religion. Mass is the most precious thing in my life. It’s the storyboard of how to get through. It is what I am and you must respect me for it, not mock me.’ (237) Gerry responds that she must in turn allow him his truth, which to him is *the* truth.

MacLaverty shows poise and restraint in his portrayal of two people who have shared so much and yet have lost the ability to communicate their hopes and fears to one another. They have reached the point where they live separate lives, one of which is devoted to God and the other to alcohol. But the flame of love has not been completely extinguished and it is that which wins out in the end, as Gerry resolves to address his drinking in an attempt to hold on to his wife. The last lines read: ‘To him her presence was as important as the world. And the stars around it. If she was an instance of the goodness in this world then passing through it by her side was miracle enough.’ (243) Miracles manifest themselves in different ways and Gerry’s change of heart could indicate the strange workings of grace.

This brief survey of MacLaverty’s work has attempted to underline his Catholic sensibility. Although an unbeliever himself, someone who experienced first-hand the toxic reality of sectarianism in sectarian Belfast and who would not subscribe to the Church’s position on many issues such as the role of women and the harsh position adopted on sexual activity outside of marriage, it would appear that MacLaverty saw the dramatic potential that Catholicism provides for the artist. While there is a lot more to his writing than its religious content, this aspect does nurture his aesthetic imagination and gives the work its undoubtedly distinctive quality. It is appropriate to give the final word to Richard Rankin Russell, the critic who has done the most to increase MacLaverty’s standing as a writer:

In Bernard MacLaverty’s fiction, we see ourselves as others see us, and, perhaps, ourselves as we might yet be. Despite the tendency in our present critical environment to view art as largely incapable of providing a moral design for our lives, revealing such insights constitutes a very considerable achievement.⁷

⁶ Bernard MacLaverty, *Midwinter Break* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2017), p.183. Subsequent references will be to this edition.

⁷ Rankin Russell, *Bernard MacLaverty*, p.144.